

Young people, dangerous driving and car culture

There is a widespread perception that hoons are a major danger on Australian roads. However, the statistics and the research paint a very different picture. While young people are disproportionately involved in motor vehicle accidents, very few serious crashes involve high performance vehicles. So why are hoons a source of popular concern? This paper looks at the perceptions of danger associated with hooning and other aspects of car culture, and also explores the purposes that these activities play in the lives of young men.

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The relationship between young people and car culture is a complex one and forms an interesting facet of contemporary society. Recent media reports in most states and territories have once again highlighted the harms associated with cars and, in particular, the dangers of young people driving cars (Hohenboken 2007a, 2007b; Duncan 2007; Baker 2007; Fuller 2007a). Much of the public debate over youth driving culture has been framed around concepts of youthful deviance, youthful incompetence and, frequently, a conflation of the two. It appears that the problem of “accidents” involving young persons is basically a problem stemming from the actions of the young people themselves. Moreover, if one believes the media commentary, it is young people in general who constitute the problem, almost as if youthfulness itself is a liability. Blame tends to be attributed to young people in ways that downplay both specific factors linked to fatal accidents involving young people, as well as the broader sociological processes linked to car culture generally. Young people (18–25) are disproportionately overrepresented in fatal crash statistics (Transport Accident Commission 2007), but contextual distinctions need to be made between conceptions of dangerousness and certain driving behaviour, and other significant contributing factors.

Sensationalist reports in the current affairs media may give the impression of “hoons taking over our streets”, and of P-platers being inherently dangerous drivers. Youth, lack of experience and bad driving are folded together in ways that imply little distinction between hoons and the young

driver. Hooning, itself, is left unexplored as a specific type of social practice. Simultaneously, the prominent attention given to specific car accidents and the negative portrayal of young drivers can ignite public outcry and lead to calls for tougher restrictions and penalties on all young people. Yet, rarely are young people themselves asked what they think, and little attention is given to explaining specific events and trends as complex social phenomena (see Fuller 2007a).

In this article, we review relevant Australian research and literature on different aspects of youth driving culture. Our concern is to raise questions about dominant stereotypes regarding the youthful driver, to consider car culture in its widest sense, and to distinguish the notion of (intentional) risk-taking and dangerous driving from the idea that young people are somehow inherently dangerous drivers. The fundamental contention of this paper is that there are multiple dimensions to young people and car culture, which are comprised of various types of driving behaviour and social events, including street machining, cruising and hooning. There are also multiple ways in which “dangerousness” can be defined and related to questions of road safety and car culture. If we want to achieve safer roads for everyone, then we must put the use of cars into specific technological, social and cultural contexts.

Driving us mad

Hooning is the social phenomenon that attracts the most public debate when it comes to young people and driving behaviour. Accordingly, the overall tendency in Australia in recent years has been to enact tougher measures to curb what is seen to be an increasing trend (Denholm & Dalton 2005). The word “hoon” is a term commonly used in Australian culture to refer to young people, especially young men, who engage in what may be perceived as dangerous driving behaviour. It can also refer to those who constantly show off in their cars in public. The conflation of these activities in definitions and perceptions of hooning is, however, problematic. The perception of danger, in the event, for example, of performing doughnuts or fishtails, belies the fact that in some circum-

stances this kind of driving may be relatively safe (e.g. in the controlled spaces of a race track or isolated rural areas), while in others it may put participants and others at risk (e.g. crowded city streets). Regardless of the specific context, hooning on public streets and highways is generally considered unsafe by authorities and has called forth a range of sanctions.

Several states in Australia have enacted anti-hooning legislation. A typical anti-hooning law describes the offence as “the use of a vehicle in an irresponsible and dangerous manner in public places” (Tasmania Police 2006), with the elements of hooning usually including street racing, burnouts and playing loud car stereos (Fuller 2007a). New South Wales, Queensland, Western Australia, the Northern Territory and Tasmania have anti-hooning laws that involve car confiscation (Tasmania Police 2006; Spence 2007).

Car modification is an integral element of many forms of car culture, and there are stringent guidelines in most states that police may use to curtail this practice, especially in New South Wales. For example, certain tyre sizes (e.g. too wide) may be banned, and restrictions placed on the amount of noise a vehicle is allowed to make (e.g. particular types of mufflers).

It is important at this stage to differentiate between specific aspects of driving behaviour and car culture, noting the differences as well as the links between them. This is because not all street machiners may engage in hooning behaviour, but car modification is nevertheless central to their activity. Not all hooners modify their cars. A one-size-fits-all law may well create problems for the car enthusiast who may inadvertently get caught up in the anti-hooning net.

Hooning has been criminalised because it is thought that it can result in injury to self and others, property damage and even loss of life. In other words, because of its perceived dangerousness. Young people (especially males) are consistently over-represented among those killed or injured in traffic accidents, and risky driving behaviour is often implicated in these accidents (Smart & Vassallo 2005; Royal Automobile Club of Tasmania 2006). However, close analysis of “hooning accidents” as such, reveals that hooning is not the large road safety problem that the media makes it out to be, since

the percentage of these types of accidents is less significant in the context of all motor vehicle accidents (Fuller 2007a).

Referring to “dangerousness” in the context of driving needs to start from the premise that “dangerousness” is in fact a heterogeneous concept and has multiple dimensions and definitions (Fuller 2007b). For example, a legalistic definition would be concerned with the transgression of rules (such as using an overtaking lane as a cruising lane), which makes situations dangerous. From a law enforcement perspective, dangerousness might relate to behaviour, such as speeding or drink driving. A technical approach to dangerousness would refer to the capacity of the vehicle to meet safety standards, as well as road design and motorway variables (such as lighting, road maintenance and sightlines). A statistically-based definition, as is often referred to in the case of young drivers, is based upon the frequency and distribution of accidents associated with particular population groups (defined on the basis of, for example, gender, age, socioeconomic background, ethnic background, migrant or refugee background etc.). At the street level, dangerousness might relate to what one feels to be dangerous – the feeling that you are going fast, the exhilaration of performing a “doughnut” – even when undertaken in generally safe conditions. In addition, it is our view that dangerous and risk-taking driving within the context of youth driving culture cannot be ameliorated without understanding why it takes place.

The social nature of youth car culture

Activities associated with car culture can provide a social alternative for young people with a lot of free time but not necessarily adequate access to other entertainment and recreational options and facilities. For young people who are interested in cars, hooning, cruising and street machining can be seen as an exciting alternative – the car facilitates sociability (Carrabine & Longhurst 2002). At the age of 17 or 18, a person can get their licence, gain independence from parents, and have the option of exiting the education system, thus allowing greater capacity to work and earn

money. Active participation in car culture can be an enjoyable lifestyle choice for some.

Each element of car culture offers different social opportunities and can meet specific needs

TABLE 1 Key car terms

P-platers drivers who hold a provisional license (the first three years). Australians are able to obtain their Ps from the age of 17 or 18 years (varies by state).

Street machining commonly involves gatherings of car enthusiasts and their vehicles. The key purpose of street machining is display. People do it to show off their usually heavily modified and impressive vehicles, to demonstrate status, material ownership, creativity and craftsmanship.

Cruising can involve doing blockies, going for a drive with friends, cruising in certain areas as a potential form of attraction or cars driving in convoy. Cruising can be quite visible and audible because of hotted-up engines and powerful sound systems, but is generally harmless and legal.

Blockies repeatedly circling the block or cruising in an area, often a visible and audible activity.

Hooning driving that can involve risk-taking and danger. Hooning is a crime, and is considered unsafe because of the potential consequences. Hooning involves driving actions such as those listed below, as well as speeding.

Burnouts and fishtails a sustained loss of traction during acceleration; it involves spinning the wheels, smoking the tires and burning rubber. Fishtails involve driving and burning out in a linear direction punctuated by swerving when the back of the vehicle flicks out to the left or right.

Doughnuts a sustained loss of traction during acceleration in a circular motion, i.e. a burnout in a circle. Also called “figure of eights” and “circlework”.

Rolling blockade organised through mobile phones and SMS, this is formed by a pack of cars clogging up what is normally a main road in order to allow two cars at the front of the pack to race from a rolling start.

Drifting refers to a specific driving technique, as well as a type of motor sport based on that technique. It occurs when the wheels are pointing in a different direction to the direction the car is sliding overall. Drifting requires skill, and is growing in popularity. There is potential for harm if the driver loses control of the car.

Street racing, time trials and drag racing street racing refers to illegal use of public streets to race against each other. Time trials involve racing against the clock, drivers may compare times after separately racing a set area. Drag racing refers to dragging another vehicle off at the lights. All three are competitive and potentially dangerous.

in the lives of the young people who engage in them. The similarity between each of them is that they aid and contribute to personal identity and social status. The main social function of street machining is display: to attract attention and public acknowledgment (Forrester 1999). Having an impressive vehicle to drive around in and show off at social get-togethers can be a source of pride and self-esteem; it demonstrates material ownership and social capital. If the young person has done the car modifications themselves, they gain kudos for their creativity, personal expression, technical expertise and craftsmanship (Carrabine & Longhurst 2002; Thomas & Butcher 2003). The process of car modification for street machiners and cruisers resembles a ritual: an important personal and social experience with meaning attached (Thomas & Butcher 2003).

The main social functions of hooning are to display mastery, skill and technique. It shares common elements with youth car culture in general: hooning may be done to show off to peers, gain attention from the opposite sex or to feel an adrenaline rush (which in this case may involve taking risks behind the wheel). It emphasises solidarity and belonging. A fundamental part of cruising is having a nice car to drive because it serves as a signifier of connection and popularity (Thomas & Butcher 2003).

Hooning can provide a young driver with a sense of control; it is the performative element of car culture. As will be discussed later, hooning as a specific type of practice is closely associated with gender identity. As such, the practice often becomes equated with young, male car lovers in ways that misrepresent the nature of the population group in general. While hooning has been criminalised, in youth subcultures it is accepted as relatively normal – a case of “boys being boys”. It fits the stereotype of the Aussie larrikin lad mucking about in his youth. The image of the young men in their hotted-up cars as “revheads”, as immature risk-takers, masks the much more complex practices – social, technical and artistic – which comprise young people’s participation in car culture (Bengry-Howell 2001 cited in Thomas & Butcher 2003, p.159; Fuller 2007a).

Cruising, hooning and street machining each have an affirmative social function in the lives

of the young people who engage in them – they are major components of the social life of car culture. Dangerous driving, when it occurs, can be, for some, a byproduct of this culture.

Denholm and Dalton (2005) note that being a car culture enthusiast can be a positive lifestyle choice. Here it is important to re-emphasise the different parts of car culture because, other than certain types of hooning (e.g. drag racing on public roads), participation in car culture is generally harmless. One automotive expert commented that “a lot of kids could probably go spend their money on drugs and alcohol but instead they put it into something they can call their own, it is their entertainment on the weekend” (Browner cited in Denholm & Dalton 2005). The grouping of all car enthusiasts together as “hoons” is unwarranted and exemplifies a misunderstanding of young car enthusiasts, why they do what they do, and the positive social function that youth driving culture has in their lives (see Walker, Butland & Connell 2000). Having a car to drive can provide a form of belonging and acceptance within one’s peer group, as well as an opportunity to form new social contacts based on common interests, knowledge and experience.

Boys in cars / boys and their toys

Understanding masculinity is a vital part of understanding the connections between car culture and young people. Commentators agree that cars act as symbols of masculinity and are instrumental in asserting personal status and power (White 1990; Walker 1999; Walker, Butland & Connell 2000; Dawes 2002; Thomas & Butcher 2003; O’Connor & Kelly 2006). Hooning that consists of dangerous driving is a predominantly male type of driving behaviour – for example, in the first two years of anti-hooning laws in Tasmania, 97% of offenders were male (Low Choy 2006). Statistics on cruising and street machining may not be readily available, but these activities are also male dominated. Young women’s active participation in car culture is minimal; they generally play spectator and support roles. Thus, the focus in this paper is on young men simply because it is more relevant to frame the following discussions in terms of masculinity.

Cruising, hooning and street machining each have an affirmative social function in the lives of the young people who engage in them.

For many, cars are toys for the boys. Because of this association, young men who have no interest in cars and are not keen on getting their driver's licence may experience marginalisation and misunderstanding.

There are multiple masculinities and different types of identity that a young man can adopt. Hegemonic masculinity is a dominant form of masculinity that is different from other subordinated masculinities (Connell 1995). According to Cunneen and White, the idealised male sex-role is "to be tough, competitive, emotionally inexpressive, public, active and autonomous" (2002, p.228). It can be argued that hooning and cruising are a demonstration of this – a way of acting out what it is to be a man. Risk-taking to feel adrenaline and the thrill of speed or danger while controlling a performance vehicle appeals to many young men. Certain types of driving behaviour are perceived as "macho", and young men may engage in these behaviours to assert their masculinity, personal skill and control, as well as subvert conservative driving norms and rebel against authorities. Active participation in car culture is a rite of passage for many young men, an important part of growing up, but nearly all grow out of it when other life stages and responsibilities come along.

The relationship between gender identity, cars and car culture is socially constructed (White 1990). Many males are socialised into car culture. Cars are important toys in infancy, followed by the ownership of a bicycle in primary school. In high school, many boys talk about modified cars, read car magazines, and engage in car culture electronically on their games consoles. For many, the teenage years bring a strong desire to be a part of car culture in one's own right. The key components of youth driving culture and car culture – "competitive-ness, freedom, mateship, display, technical skill and ability, speed and performance" – are reinforced socially by significant role models such as fathers, brothers and older peers at school (Walker, Butland & Connell 2000, p.157). In other words, for many, cars are toys for the boys. Because of this association, young men who have no interest in cars and are not keen on getting their driver's licence may experience marginalisation and misunderstanding.

Walker (1998) also highlights the existence of a "chivalrous" masculinity in car culture, one that provides another dimension to the usual expressions of hegemonic masculinity. In a case study of a young car thief, Walker (1998) describes "chivalrous" masculinity as behaviour

that involves being a gentleman through nurturing and protective relations with women, including never committing car-related crime against vulnerable women. Such chivalry still exists within the context of car culture.

There is also a sexual element to car culture, which is twofold. One sexual aspect is that the car can be used as a potential source of attraction from the opposite sex. Young men may perform in their cars to gain the attention of young women, and to assert hegemonic masculinity. Research highlights the common view among car culture participants that a man cannot attract a woman without a decent car and that "cars are a powerful sex aid" (Walker 1999, p.182). Thomas and Butcher (2003) argue that, "the power of the car and sexual power are interrelated in the minds of many car enthusiasts" (2003, p.155). This is supported by Cunneen and White's assertion that cars are symbolic objects linked to fantasies of material and sexual domination and success (2002, p.233). This sexual domination is associated with hegemonic masculinity, and is a sexist understanding of gender relations.

The other sexual aspect is that the relationship that some young males have with their car can border on the erotic. Some types of masculinity lend themselves to a car fetish where the car is like a lover. The relationship between men and cars has been described as a "love affair", encompassing the erotic and emotional complexity that the metaphor conveys (Scharff 1991 cited in Walker 1999, p.180). Walker (1999) highlights the ironic nexus between the two sexual elements of car culture: it can be deeply sexist and yet it also elicits the sexual.

Australian research by Walker, Butland and Connell (2000) highlights the important issue of class in relation to car culture and masculinity. Car culture offers young working-class men "the building of masculine identity, and thus a sense of dignity and self-worth" when the other approved source of masculine dignity – being a breadwinner – is unavailable due to high youth unemployment (Walker, Butland & Connell 2000, p.156). Car culture and certain driving behaviour are a form of protest masculinity that cements young men's manhood and demonstrates rebellion against authorities (Walker, Butland

& Connell 2000). For young working-class men, and also those from minority groups, car culture and certain driving behaviours provide a sense of control in daily lives that probably lack feelings of control (Collins et al. 2000). Car culture offers a forum for belonging and acceptance for young men who have experienced exclusion from other arenas, such as higher education, employment and the leisure market.

Cars and driving culture

In order to gain a deeper understanding about the context in which driving behaviour in general takes place, three key elements of driving culture need to be considered: the technological, social and cultural. Each offers a different perspective and yet complements the others in illustrating the “big picture” of driving culture in contemporary society.

Technological

Now more than ever, we have the capacity to drive fast because of ongoing development of car technology. To placate demands for cars to be more efficient, have better fuel economy, and meet emissions targets, some new cars are being manufactured with increased power (kilowatts) and fewer engine design restrictions (Davis & Dowling 1999; McCarthy 2006). This new direction in car technology affects all drivers, not just those with a preoccupation with technology enhancement.

The phenomenon of car modification is exceptionally popular among young car enthusiasts, especially those who have imported cars. Car modification is a multi-million dollar industry, and the mounting pressure for better technology is driven by image rather than need. To put it simplistically, there is still the “my car can go faster/is better than yours” mentality. Having enhanced car technology and cars capable of going at extremes of speed is quite common in circles of street machiners, hoons and cruisers. From the point of view of dangerousness, we need to distinguish features that pertain to cars in general (i.e. cars have an in-built capacity to go fast) and thus that affect all who drive them, and those features that represent not only capacities but certain car-related social values that may also relate to the

driving behaviour itself (i.e. speed as indicative of successful modification of the machine).

Social

Integral to any discussion of young people and car culture is the subject of public space where this is defined as a physical environment which can provide different social meanings for different groups of people, competing interests and varying uses. Cruising, hooning and street machining all involve the social use of public space where young people can exert agency by independently engaging with their surroundings. Young people use public space to meet their needs; they do not always use specific spaces as they were designed to be used. For example, an industrial area may be used as a prime site for hooning and for street racers to congregate because it is less frequently under the gaze of authorities. Paradoxically, such spaces may also be much safer for hooning, since they are less crowded and allow for activities such as burnouts and fishtails without threatening members of the public. Public space has a dual function: it is a place where gatherings of young people are visible and anonymous at the same time (White 1994). According to Redshaw, young drivers talk about “the freedom to go where they want, when they want, which all contribute to a greater sense of control” (2001, p.7 cited in Thomas & Butcher 2003). A car is a “mechanism for the management of privacy” and mobile sociability (Carrabine & Longhurst 2002, p.194). Youth is a time of developing interests and independence, and car culture and the use of public space meet these needs.

Public space can be a site of conflict between young drivers and authorities. The street represents a site where hierarchies of power, authority and control contrast with individual agency and resistance. The street is both the main domain for police–youth contact and the target of police intervention (White 1994). For example, Forrester (1999) found that street machiners were upset by the police and their contact with them. The coercive “clamp-down” approach, where a swarm of police descended on a car park of young people, fuelled hostility between the two groups. The street machiners felt that police were rejecting their passion for cars and method of socialising by targeting them whenever they congregated together

in a public space (Forrester 1999). From their perspective, no harm was being done, and nothing dangerous was involved. The subjective views of the machiners are supported by crash statistics, which demonstrate that the majority of cars involved in crashes are not high-performance modified vehicles, but instead ordinary, usually older and cheaper, vehicles (Department of Transport, Energy & Infrastructure 2007). It could well be that these are exactly the type of vehicles favoured by many young people because of their low purchase cost. If so, then youth statistics in regard to road accidents may be as much about budget limitations as about driving behaviour and experience per se.

Cultural

Car culture forms a part of our culture more generally. Youth driving behaviour, especially hooning, is not an isolated phenomenon; it needs to be considered in context. Also, there are elements of hooning or cruising that may occur as a part of the driving behaviour of adults generally.

Speeding and speed culture is a normalised part of modern living. The need for speed can be addictive and a deep-seated element of life in contemporary Western society. Tailgating is an increasingly salient example of speed culture, as are the views that speed limits are the minimum rather than maximum, and that “slow” drivers are incompetent (Redshaw 2006).

It can be argued that for all drivers speed is not only limited by regulations, but more significantly, is culturally driven. It is hypocritical, therefore, to target young drivers who are deemed to be hoons. Speed culture is reinforced by media in the form of print, film and television, which target a wide driving audience, not just male car enthusiasts. Therefore, all drivers, younger and experienced alike, need to examine the many cultural ideals that contribute to driving behaviour and experiences.

So where or from whom are young drivers learning their driving habits? To a certain extent, from older experienced drivers. Mature drivers tend to consider themselves good drivers who are skilled enough to supersede road regulations if they are in control and can do it “safely”. This attitude is widely accepted in the community, and is a case of experienced drivers setting a

bad example for young drivers (Redshaw 2006). Parents telling teenagers to be safe, sensible drivers and obey road rules may be a case of the old adage “do as I say, and not as I do”. Redshaw (2006) argues that “how we as a society approach driving affects how young drivers take to roads”, and that it is important “to tackle the major cultural acceptance of bending the rules”. It is important that any analysis of youth driving culture be considered in context of driving behaviour generally, how young drivers are socialised by learning driving behaviour from parents, and the significance of cultural and lifestyle norms that influence drivers of all ages.

On a tangible level, there are specific factors that can contribute to the disproportionately high rate of fatal accidents involving young drivers. These include: maleness (72%), single vehicle accidents (70%), time (between 8pm and 6am, 54%), day (Fridays, 22%, and Saturdays, 22%), high alcohol times (68%), on maximum speed roads (54%), and country roads (58%) (Transport Accident Commission 2007). Further consideration and research needs to be given to factors (and any interactions between them) such as inexperience; engaging in more or different kinds of risk-taking than older drivers; owning older, cheaper or substandard vehicles; driving more on weekends and at night; and binge drinking and drink driving. These factors go beyond phenomena such as cruising or hooning; they form part of the bigger picture of youth driving culture and may affect young drivers generally, regardless of whether a young person identifies with a particular subculture or not. There is a need for more engagement with and participation by young people in research in this area if we are to appreciate fully how these diverse influences actually shape youth driving practices.

Conclusion

The simplistic view of what constitutes “bad” driving (Fuller 2007b) belies the fact that youth driving culture is complex in nature and comprises multiple dimensions and definitions of dangerousness. Indeed, there are cases when certain types of hooning might well be considered safer than driving on main roads at rush hour.

Examination of young people’s driving behaviour should not result in finger-pointing

and intolerance for their passion for cars and use of public space. Dangerous driving is not youth-specific, it is an issue for drivers of all ages. Problems such as road rage are equally as concerning as hooning, and are more likely to involve parents.

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